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Overcoming Evil

by Aron Krell

I get asked: Was it really that bad?

I say: No - It was worse.

But I am not sensitive about this stuff anymore, although I live it every day again each time I take my shower. The number inked into my arm says: B7998

My name is Aron Krell. I was born on November 26, 1927 in Poland in the city of Lodz. In April of 1940, when I was not yet 13 years old, the Nazis forcibly resettled me and my family, as well as everyone we knew, into the Lodz Ghetto. That was the beginning and this is my story.

Cegelniana Street 24, First Floor

If I think hard about it I can recall being in a photographer's studio with my two elder brothers as my earliest memory. I was a baby, the only one with long hair. The second thing I can remember, and this scene is more vivid, is of being on top of the dining room table, playing with a pair of scissors. My older brother Moishe was under the table and he was teasing me. He would stick out his head and call me names. Well, I would fix him! In a stroke of genius (or so I must have thought at the time) I positioned the scissors just so, at the edge of the table, the sharp blades poised to hit him smack in the head. Moishe emerged. I hit him they did.

I was the youngest of three boys. We were what you would call a middle income family, Jewish Orthodox. The Krell family (the name means "bead" in German) were among the original settlers of that area. We lived in an almost wholly Jewish neighborhood. At home, we spoke Yiddish. My father ran a shop that produced machine-made knit sweaters that employed several Jewish young men. My older brothers were taught the manufacturing process. Every Friday my father would take us to the synagogue, Shmuel Krell with his three sons Moshe Itzhak (the eldest), Avraham Tzvi and little Aharon. Avraham and I could speak Hebrew. How proud of us my father was then!

My older brother and I were given a private school education. The school that I went to was a Hebrew elementary school. There, we communicated in Polish and Hebrew. The school's name was Javne, after a town in ancient Israel considered a leading center of learning.

And so the flow of life ebbed and rose. Sometimes happiness was marred by pain. A great tragedy struck our family in the year 1937. My father, may he rest in peace, became ill with pneumonia and after a lengthy struggle (of course we did not have then in Poland the medical resources that are available today) in and out of hospitals, passed away in October of that year at the age of 35.

Of course, the passing away of our beloved father was a great blow to us children, and an even greater one to our dear mother, who at the age of 35 became a widow with three children, and most assuredly the sole breadwinner.

It is said that the dead are buried and the living have to go on living. It is said that Time is the greatest healer. It was so in our way of life, although with great difficulty. Under the prodding by my unforgettable mother, we pushed ahead. Slowly, we did as best as we could to go on with life.

My mother was an extraordinary person, and she grew strong and purposeful. Needless to say, it was very hard for her to overcome the blow that she was dealt at her very young age. Mother went to the distant cemetery every day, coming home in tears, barely speaking to us. This was the time of year when the weather was miserable, end of fall, raining almost daily. The visits to my father's grave took a toll on mother. She caught a very bad cold followed, I believe, by the grippe and was laid up in bed for a while. It was thanks to the generosity of her parents and her sisters that we managed somehow, and overcame what I thought then had been the worst of times.

My oldest brother Moishe started to work for my uncle, who had also entered the sweater business thanks to our father, and so he learned how to make the best of it. Little by little partial normalcy returned. My mother had pulled herself together, bless her heart, and she was becoming a go getter. She returned to attending to business and tried to reestablish some old contacts. We boys were growing up. Our passion was soccer, and Avraham, my middle brother, was a terrific soccer player.

We became quite successful in our little endeavors and time passed. But little did we know what lay ahead of us. The year was 1938. Dark clouds started to cross the European Continent and the time of the infamous Appeasement had arrived. The Jews of Germany had been expelled and began streaming into Poland, to the city of Zbonszyn. The Jewish organizations of Poland tried to place them with Jewish families. That was how it began.

My mother, full of courage and grit, smuggled herself into Soviet territory, to Bialystok, and even managed to secure an apartment for us. But when she came back for us the family held a solemn meeting. She was advised not to relocate, her projects were discouraged. So we remained in our apartment, in Lodz, Poland, at Cegelniana Street Number 24, first floor.

Baluty

*'Laja, du herst ich bin dco (mining fun di yidin in Lodz Ghetto
Hot sies art uct — Chajinke us du vūst starben wi ci kaining
szlab jetzt asnicht yes di sztarben via hint.'*

Mordechai Chaim Ruinkovsk, a widower, was the leader appointed by the Germans to oversee the Lodz Ghetto. He was called 'the King. The story goes that he went to the cemetery to visit his wife Lia, and he spoke like this: You see, Lia, what you are missing! They made me the King of the Jews of the Ghetto. And it is said that Lia answered. "Chaim if you want to die like a king die now, because otherwise you will die like a dog." And that's exactly how he died. He was deported two transports before we were, and he was gassed.

I lived in the Lodz Ghetto from its inception on April 1, 1940 until its liquidation on August 28, 1944.

It was still cold when we had to leave the apartment. I remember it felt like wintertime. We rented a cart that was also a sled, where we piled the heavy stuff. The ghetto had been created in what was the poorest section of Lodz, a neglected area, a slum called Baluty. Fences were put up to enclose it. This is where my family and I and all the Jews of Lodz were forced to resettle.

The day after we left the apartment, after they had closed the ghetto, my mother and I took a chance. We removed the yellow arm bands marking us as Jews (it was later that Jews were forced to wear the Yellow Star: on the left side of the chest, over the heart, and on the right shoulder in the back). That first day in the ghetto, we were able to slip back to Cegelniana Street to try to retrieve what we could. We found naked walls, empty rooms, the whole apartment stripped bare overnight.

Life in the ghetto was miserable. We were constantly hungry. All we had to eat was potatoes, turnips, and very little bread. Once in a while we were able to get horsemeat. But in fact it was 4 years of continuous and painful hunger. We had next to no health facilities or medical care.

In the ghetto, everybody worked. For 4 years, I worked in a metal factory producing nails out of wire for at least 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. The nails were for the German army, for the soldiers to use as pitons on mountain climbs. I operated the machine that produced nails out of heavy reams of wire. My mother worked in a factory that made shoes out of straw.

My brother Avraham, the great soccer player, died of malnutrition in 1942. He was about 17 years old. These were bad years indeed. But we had each other, we went home at night, we slept in our own beds, and we had hope. We hoped that some day soon all this would come to an end. The clandestine radios of the ghetto told us about the state of the war. In the summer of 1944, life in Baluty Ghetto did come to an end.

In August of 1944, the ghetto was liquidated. We were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

When the liquidation of the ghetto started, we felt doomed. We were loaded into cattle cars filled to maximum capacity, the doors were locked. The Germans provided us with two barrels, one containing drinking water and the other was for nature's needs. Dante's description of hell was paradise compared to what we had to endure during our journey.

After several days the train finally stopped and the doors opened at Birkenau. I remember that it was a sunny day but what overwhelmed us was the noise. People in funny-looking striped uniforms with shaved heads screamed loudly in German "leave the packages!" and the SS with their barking dogs added to the noise. The stench of burning flesh pierced the air. The SS then grabbed children from their mothers and tossed them aside. The SS immediately separated men from women and old from young. That fateful day when I arrived at Birkenau was the last time that I saw my mother - the worst day of my life.

My brother Moshe and I were lucky to be selected to be tattooed. The people who tattooed us whispered to us that we would be selected to work. After spending several days in the hell of Birkenau, my brother was taken away. I never saw him again. A short time later I was selected and sent to Auschwitz. And thus I started life in the concentration camps.

How do you compare Hell on Earth? Compared to Birkenau, Auschwitz was a mere nightmare. In Birkenau, we had slept on the ground. In Auschwitz, they had wood board bunks and thin mattresses. We took showers, we were given clean clothes once a week. Indeed, cleanliness was a slogan: "Ein lause, dein tot" (one louse, your death). In this parallel universe with no mirrors and no clocks, the rags we wore were freshly laundered. I remember that I managed to contact a cousin of my mother's, Ello Frankfurter, who had left Poland years before to emigrate to Belgium. I found out that he worked in the laundry. That was one of the best jobs to have because of the potential for bribes, mostly from the inmate Kapos, who offered cigarettes, food. And he did help me, he gave me food. Cousin Ello survived.

But I did a different kind of work. I dug ditches and loaded and unloaded heavy bricks all day long. This was not productive labor. This was hard labor, to keep us occupied and to exhaust us. The conditions were very bad and we were under constant Nazi guard. The Kapos were especially cruel to us - beatings and other forms of arbitrary punishment were meted out regularly. One punishment was to have us stand in the pelting rain for hours.

The young men deemed fit to work were instructed in masonry. There were about fifty to sixty of us in this group, ranging in age from 15 to 18. We were instructed by a German national who was not an inmate.

Shulem Kramarski: Companion in the Circles of Hell

Shulem and I were bunkmates in Auschwitz and fellow students at the "Auschwitz Bricklaying School." He too was a Lodzer, but I had not known him in Lodz or Baluty. He was the same age as me. His tattoo number came one number after mine - His was 87999. He must have come on the same transport from Lodz that I had been on. To get their number, people were lined up alphabetically. We were the K's. Shulem and I then were pushed on to the lines of barbers, who removed all body hair with a hair removing device — everywhere: torso and limbs, armpits, groin. An awful process.

So it happened that from Birkenau way station Shulem and I both went to Auschwitz and bunked together. In the three-tier bunk I was on the top bunk and Shulem was on the bottom one. I forget the name of the guy in the middle.

I remember that once when we were in Auschwitz the Nazis took Shulem to the doctor's office. They wanted to practice on him how to remove teeth without anesthetic.

Shulem and I stayed together for several months. After Auschwitz was evacuated at the end of 1944 we were sent to a large camp in Germany proper known as Sachsenhausen, and eventually we wound up in the same small work sub-camp of Lieberose. It was our job to clear the trees in a forest so that housing could be built for Germans who fled the Russian territory, and we also had to lay railroad tracks for narrow-gage trains.

Shulem was with me on the evacuation and death march back to Sachsenhausen as the Russian troops closed in. Then in January 1945 we were transported to Mauthausen in Austria. Each day, we were forced to walk several miles to clean up sites that had been bombed by the allies. In the harsh, cold winters of Europe, we walked a couple of miles to and from our barracks everyday and worked all day without a break from dawn to dusk.

During the terrible White Night, Shulem and I were still together. And we were together when we were liberated outside of Mauthausen in the small town of Gunskirchen by the Americans. After the evening of May 4 1945, I did not see Shulem Kramarski again.

Where is Red?

At Lieberose we cleared land so that we could build barracks for Germans who were fleeing Eastern Europe and needed to be resettled. At Lieberose, our group of fifty to sixty young Polish Jewish men lived among many Hungarian Jewish inmates. Every concentration camp had a hierarchy of inmates. The block elder, or leader of the block, was always a non-Jew. Next under him was the assistant to the block elder, who often was a Jew. The block I was in at Lieberose had an assistant block elder who was a Hungarian Jew. His name was Shoni.

Shoni passionately hated Polish Jews. We knew this because among us was a Hungarian-speaking man from Bessarabia who told us that Shoni referred to us as "dirty Polish Jews." On New Year's Eve, 1945, Shoni decided to take all of the Polish Jews outside and whip us. There was no rhyme or reason for why he did this except that he loathed Polish Jews. All of us boys were made to take down our pants so that Shoni could whip.

When he came to me, I said that there was no reason for me to take down my pants for a whipping because I had done nothing wrong. Shoni screamed at me to take down my pants and I replied that I would not obey him. Shoni sent all of us back to our room in the barrack. We were in the room several minutes when Shoni and his assistant came in and took me to the block elder's room. The block elder was dead drunk. As I came in, the block elder put on gloves and started punching my face. When I fell down, there were two men who picked me up.

The block elder continued punching me repeatedly. When the block elder stopped punching me, Shoni came over to me and said, "I am not the block elder. I am a boxer. I'll show you what I can do to you." He told me to take down my pants and to lie over a bench. When the block elder beat me, I wasn't bleeding and I wasn't crying. But when Shoni told me to lie down, my eyes cried rivers of tears. I was also bleeding profusely from my nose. Seeing this, the block elder told Shoni to open the door and to throw me outside into the snow. Men from my barrack were outside and helped me by putting snow on my face to clean me up. We returned to the barracks and went to sleep. The following morning, New Year's Day, 1945, the camp leader of Lieberose entered our barrack with two SS officers. Shoni was with them. As they entered the room Shoni said: "Where is Red who spoke so loudly yesterday?"

Nobody moved, nobody made a sound, and nobody raised his hand. Once again Shoni screamed, "Where is Red who spoke so loudly yesterday?" Again, the inmates made no response. Shoni was furious and wanted revenge. He approached an inmate that resembled me and grabbed him, thinking that he would teach him a lesson. But Shoni had the wrong man. As Shoni was about to leave the barrack with this young man, I approached the camp leader and said that Shoni had the wrong man and that it was I who spoke so loudly yesterday. The camp leader was an Austrian political prisoner who at one time worked for Schuschnigg, the Austrian prime minister. When I identified myself, the camp leader hit me in the face, so hard that I flew about ten feet. This blow actually saved my life. I fell into the group of inmates lined up on one side of the room. The two SS men, the camp leader and his entourage left. Had I been standing in the middle of the room or next to them, I would have been taken out and hanged.

A few weeks after this, Lieberose was disbanded as the Russians advanced and we were marched back to Sachsenhausen. When we were marched back to Sachsenhausen, the sick were placed on carts pushed by inmates. There were no ranks during a death march. Kapos and block elders became irrelevant. There were no blocks to police. Shoni marched as any other inmate - Shoni who had not known starvation, beatings, forced marches, hard labor. After several days of walking, Shoni was put on a cart because he was too weak to walk. He was taken away and he was never again seen alive. This gave me closure of sorts.

The White Night

Once we arrived back at Sachsenhausen, we were sent on cattle cars to Mauthausen in January or February of 1945. It was a bitterly cold winter and we had only thin uniforms and open shoes. We arrived in Mauthausen in the evening. We were taken to rooms that had showers and were told by the Germans to undress. We heard a rumor that there was not enough room for all of the inmates. The Germans had us take cold showers in the basement. They took us upstairs, naked and led us to the yard, its ground covered with snow. Then made us run around, naked, all through the frigid night. This event is known as the notorious White Night.

People passed out. People fell down dead from exposure and exhaustion. All the inmates, even the non-Jewish ones, were subjected to this treatment. We heard non-Jewish inmates screaming, "We aren't Jews, why are you doing this to us?" The Germans replied, "You are all the same." After running naked in the cold, our group was considerably smaller, and we were sent to a barracks. We ran naked from the bathhouse to the barracks. We were then assigned bunks, each holding two to three men. The next day the Germans gave us clothes. This was the greeting that we received when we arrived at Mauthausen.

I was then transported to Gunskirchen where inmates were brought in to wait to die. In the bitter cold, we slept on the dirt floor in barracks made of logs and had almost no food. It wasn't until after the liberation that we found out that the little food they had given us had been poisoned by the Nazis. The Russians were closing in and the Nazis wanted to complete their mission before they got there.

I was liberated on May 5, 1945 and I consider that date to be my second birthday.

A Birthday Does Not Always Fall on the Day You Were Born

Someone once asked my daughter Esther about my birthday. This is what she wrote back:

My father was born November 26. But every year we also celebrate May 5 as my father's birthday. This most auspicious day on the Krell family calendar is the day that my father was liberated from the concentration camp Gunskirchen. In many ways, I think May 5 is more important to my father than November 26. As Daddy says, May 5 is the day he was truly born. May 5 is a cause for great celebration in our house and my family always goes to a restaurant to celebrate. I love to celebrate both of my father's birthdays, but his May 5 birthday is even more important to me. May 5 represents my father's emancipation from slavery. It marks the restoration of his autonomy and dignity. And it symbolizes my father's sheer will to survive. Every May 5 I reflect upon my father's experiences and I reaffirm yet again how truly amazing a man he is.

Esther Krell

Then & Now

Right after I retired, I read an article about the Claims Conference. I had free time and I wanted to help other survivors who were entitled to compensation payments. So two or three days a week, I have been coming to the Claims Conference where I speak on the phone with other survivors in Yiddish or Polish. We get many, many calls from them, and we try to make them feel less anxious about applying for payments or whether they will receive money at all.

I believe that it was fate that brought me to the Claims Conference. One day I overheard a staff member talking to the daughter of a man who had been with me throughout most of the War. The tattoo numbers on each of our arms were one number apart. After the War he went to Italy and then to Israel and I came to the United States.

Last year, after nearly 60 years, I had the opportunity to see Shulem again when he came to the United States to visit his daughter during Passover. Shulem had been a policeman in Israel after the war. He is of course retired now. Our wonderful reunion was only possible because I worked at the Claims Conference.

There are still nights when I wake up screaming, from nightmares about what happened to me, to my family, to 6 million other Jews. When I wake up, the nightmare isn't over. I have a constant reminder burned into my arm. The nightmares also induce extremely painful headaches.

Today, some wonder at the need we remaining survivors have to tell and to re tell the story, so that it passes from generation to generation, to connect us in the future just as the telling and re-telling at Passover of the story of our release from slavery in Egypt connects us to our past.

I do not wonder at this need. I know the importance of the story we are telling. I lived it.

I have always been a great optimist and I did not let my time in hell grind me down. I did not let the enemy "win." It is a fact that there was hope in the camps as well as despair. The only thing we had was hope, and will. We did hope, we did wait for the horror to come to an end one day. We did, certainly we survivors, have the will to live to see another day. And we were also most extraordinarily lucky.

I am disappointed that society still has not learned. That evil is still all around us. Yet I still look at the world with rose glasses. I am told that my sense of humor is not too shabby. I love to travel with my family. I take an interest in all sorts of things. I take pride in maintaining an immaculate appearance. People have been known to compliment me on my sense of fashion and classic chic. I laugh a lot at that. I laugh a lot in general. It is true that what does not destroy you makes you stronger.

“Surrounded by the Weight of History”

Being the child of a Holocaust survivor means being constantly surrounded, and sometimes suffocated, by the weight of history. It means always knowing that your parent whom you love dearly suffered unspeakable cruelties. But it also means living with a superhero, someone whose strength of character and force of will and dignity are transcendent. From a very young age, I was aware of my father's experiences during the Second World War. It showed up in obvious ways: the tattoo on my father's left inner arm, the lack of extended family on my father's side. As I grew older, my father told me bits and pieces of his experiences in accordance with my ability to comprehend and process the information. I am so lucky that my father felt comfortable enough to tell me about what he went through; many of his friends were reluctant to speak of what they underwent during the war. Because of my father's experiences, I think about the Holocaust frequently. Quite honestly, it is a topic with which I am obsessed. I view my father with a sense of awe and reverence. It is amazing to me that this man who suffered the most appalling indignities is so upbeat and positive about humanity. Daddy knows that I refer to him as “the Zen master” because he is so laid back. You know the book “Don't Sweat the Small Stuff”? Daddy could have written it. Despite the horrors and the losses, he takes everything with a grain of salt. Believe me, I need to take a leaf from his book.

My father's Holocaust experiences have inculcated in me a strong love of family and history. As the child of a Holocaust survivor, you know how important family is. Growing up, the two phrases I heard most often were “I love you” and “be careful.” I firmly believe that Daddy's enormous love for me and concern for my well-being are directly rooted in his wartime experiences. History is my great passion. How could it not be? I grew up watching the documentaries World at War and Victory at Sea with my father and we always talked about history and politics with my father. Today I am a high school history teacher and I teach about the Holocaust to my ninth grade students. I am the conduit through which my father shares his experiences with the next generation.

Esther Krell